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ABSTRACT

Do women go through identifiable developmental stages? Can generalizable patterns of transition be found, and if so, do these patterns differ according to the age of the respondent? What are women's most difficult and most satisfying times of life? To provide some exploratory quantitative data on these questions, a sample of 120 women completed a questionnaire designed to provide information about personal perceptions of transitional periods. The data indicate a lack of age differences in such areas as perception of the most satisfactory and difficult periods of life, body satisfaction, satisfaction with life, self-concept, and agreement with the goals of the women's movement. The preliminary findings suggest that women's developmental patterns are different from those of men--e.g., 47% of the subjects indicated that their own personal growth and self-acceptance were the best parts of their present life stages, while 38% indicated that freedom was the best part. The age span from 21 through 25 was mentioned most frequently as the most satisfying as well as the most difficult age range. (Author/CS)

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Age and Identity Issues of Adult Women

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Age and Identity Issues of Adult Women

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"The developmental ordering of a woman's life is a misty area still. Mostly we persist in seeing her in the reflected light of men." (Sanguiliano, 1978, p. 44)

In 1972 Roger Gould made an assumption that "people continue to change over the period of time considered to be adulthood and that developmental phases may be found during the adult span of life, if they are looked for properly." (p.33) Since then the area of research focusing on adult developmental stages throughout the lifespan has grown tremendously. Many researchers and philosophers have defined adult developmental stages including Ortega Y. Gasset (Levenson, 1978) (Youth--15-30; Initiation--30-45; Dominance--45-60; Old Age--60+), Erikson (1959) (Identity vs. Identity confusion--adolescence; Intimacy vs. Isolation--20's; Generativity vs. Stagnation--40's; Integrity vs. Despair--60's) and Levenson (1978) (Early Adulthood--17-45; Middle Adulthood--40-65; Late Adulthood--60+).

Unfortunately much of the research that has been done on developmental stages has focused on men. For example, Daniel Levenson's Season's of a Man's Life studies only men although he frequently doesn't hesitate to generalize his findings to women (1978). Roger Gould studies women and men but doesn't give information about the proportion of women and men in his samples and rarely breaks down the results by sex (1978, 1972).

When women are studied, it is frequently in terms of how they fit or don't fit the male model. Stewart (1977) explains, without emperical verification, that women go through the same developmental stages as men, only the specific issues

are different; while Sheehy (1976), in her popular best seller based primarily on research done on male samples, defines women's stages as being antithetical to men's.

There have been a small but growing number of people who have focused on women's developmental patterns. Sanguiliano, using a case study approach, found that shaping one's identity as a separate person was not the same process for women and men. She found, through her interviews with women, that while developmental stages may be appropriate to describe men's lives they do not account for the "unexpected" critical events which she found to be the "seminal female ingredient of change" (1978, p. 43-44).

Sanguilano summarizes her view of women's development as follows: "woman, any woman almost always leads a serial life--with times of hibernation and times of renewal, with times of postponement and times of actualization. Despite broad differences in personality, temperament, rearing, talents and achievement; women's lives are bound by certain common threads. By and large, women are late bloomers; by and large we postpone ourselves. We live a life derived from the male experience whether we perceive the world through the kitchen window or the rungs of the corporate ladder" (1978, p. 302).

Gunhild Hagestad's analysis of women's lives is somewhat congruent with Sanguiliano's. She too finds that age related chronological stages of development have little relevence for women particularly because of the impact that history has had on women's roles and lives. She feels, as must we all, that women currently in their twenties are having a very difficult set of experiences than women currently in their sixties did 40 years ago (1979, p. 36).

Hagestad does, however, find some patterns in women's lives. She finds that

young women go through four major transitions: finishing school, leaving home, starting work, and marrying and becoming more compressed. These stages are felt to be difficult for women because of the early socialization we give girls which stresses contingencies and flexability--being able to build a life around a yet unknown man with yet unknown interests. While this makes it difficult to develop an integrated life plan, Hagestad feels that it holds women in good stead in later years where they are more able than men to restructure a second life (1979). As with Sanguilano, Hagestad feels that women lead serial lives, that "women have become pioneers in insisting that a missed boat might come back--or there will be another boat" (1979, p. 45).

This study sought to build on previous work to determine if women do go through identifiable developmental stages as per Levenson (1978) and Gould (1978) or if women's lives are so impacted by the unpredicted, by their own flexibility and by their dependance on the male experience, as per Sanguiliano (1979) and to some extent Hagestad (1979) that few real patterns can be found.

The study examined a number of variables in order to determine if generalizable patterns of transition could be found and if these patterns differed by the age of the respondent. The study also sought to determine women's most difficult and most satisfying terms of life and what transitions, if any, these periods coincided with. The goal of the study was to provide some exploratory quantitative data about the stages of women's lives.

The population for the study was 120 women who attended a workshop on life cycles of women at a southeastern urban university. The subjects were primarily Anglo (83.5%), ranging in age from 22 to 64 with a mean age of 38.3. The population contained a majority of employed women (75.2%) primarily members of the "helping professions" of counseling and social work (38.5%) although a number

defined themselves as fulltime homemakers (15.6%). A majority of the subjects were currently married (51.4%) and had children (56.0%). The educational level of the subjects was extremely high with the minimum educational level being some college. A majority of the subjects (64.2%) had at least some graduate education.

The subjects were given a questionnaire that was designed to collect demographic information, provide an indication of self concept (through a series of ten questions developed and validated by Rosenberg) (1965) and provide information about personal perceptions of periods of transition. The response rate was 90.8% (109 responses) with no returned questionnaires unusable.

The questionnaires were analyzed using parametric and non-parametric statistics to determine what, if any, patterns of differences existed across age groups. An analysis of the marital and parental status of the subjects did find significant differences between the never married and the married and the parents and the non-parents. As Table 1 indicates both the unmarried and the non-parents tend to cluster at the lower ages.

Table 1

Marital and Parental Status of Respondents

Current Age	Never Married N/90%	Married at least once N/90%	Non Parent N/90%	Parent N/90%
21-25	5/71%	2/29%	7/100%	0/0%
26-30	11/55%	9/45%	18/90%	2/10%
31-35	4/16%	21/84%	13/52%	12/48%
36-40	5/36%	9/64%	14/28.6%	10/71.4%
41-45	4/25%	15/75%	3/15%	17/85%
46-50	0/0%	9/100%	0/0%	9/100%
51+	1/7%	13/93%	3/21.4%	11/78.6%
	31/28.4%	78/71.6%	48/44%	61/56%

$\chi^2 = 18.78$ $p < .005$ $\chi^2 = 44.35$ $p < .005$

Although the younger subjects were more apt to be unmarried and childless, when a one way analysis of variance was done over married subjects in order to examine age at first marriage, no significant difference was found across groups (F= p).

Neither were significant differences found, by age, on such variables as body satisfaction, general life satisfaction and agreement with the goals of the women's movement. As tables 2 - 4 indicate, subjects were quite similar in their perceptions of their bodies, their lives and the women's movement.

Table 2

One Way Analysis of Variance of Subjects' Satisfaction With Their Lives
(Scores range from 1-7; 7= highest satisfaction)

Age	20-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51+
N	7	20	25	14	20	9	14
$\bar{X}$	5.57	5.15	5.2	5.43	4.7	4.56	4.79
S.d.							

	Source	SS	df	ms	F
Total		245	108		
	Between groups	10.55	6	1.76	.77
	Within groups	234.45	102	2.29	

Table 3

One Way Analysis of Variance of Subjects' Satisfaction With Their Bodies
(Scores range from 1-7; 7= highest satisfaction)

Age	20-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51+
N	7	20	25	14	20	9	14
$\bar{X}$	5.86	5.65	6.44	5.86	5.6	4.67	5.57

	Source	SS	df	ms	F
Total		227.3	108		
	Between groups	23.8	6	3.97	1.99
	Within groups	203.5	102	2	

Table 4

One Way Analysis of Variance of Subjects Agreement With the Goals of the Women's Movement
(Scores range from 1-7; 7= strong agreement)

Age	20-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51+
N	7	20	25	14	20	9	14
$\bar{X}$	6	6.35	6.32	5.71	5.5	6	6.29

Source	SS	df	ms	F
Total	141	108		
Between groups	12	6	2	1.69
Within groups	129	102	1.18	

Significant differences, by age, were found when on the measure of self concept (see Table 5), however, when post hoc analyses, using the Scheffé test was performed, no significant differences between means could be found.

Table 5

One Way Analysis of Variance of Subjects Self Concepts
(Scores range from 1 to 4, 1= highest self concept)

Age	20-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51+
N	7	20	25	14	20	9	14
$\bar{X}$	1.74	1.89	1.77	1.76	1.89	1.87	1.97

Source	SS	df	ms	F
Total	28.17	108		
Between groups	3.55	6	.592	2.62*
Within groups	24.62	102	.226	

*$p < .05$

In the questionnaire, subjects were asked to respond to an open ended question, asking what they liked best about their current age. When the responses were categorized and analyzed using a Chi square, no significant differences across age were found (see Table 6).

Forty-seven percent of the subjects indicated that their own personal growth and self acceptance were the best part of their current age and 38.7% indicated that freedom was the best part of their current age, but the responses did not differ across ages.

Table 6

Subject Responses to What Was Liked Best About Current Age

	Personal Growth & Acceptance	Freedom	Optimism	Relationships
21-25	2	4	1	0
26-30	8	7	5	0
31-35	16	5	2	2
36-40	5	8	1	0
41-45	11	6	0	1
46-50	4	3	0	2
51+	4	8	0	1
	50	41	9	6

$\chi^2 = 9.37$ n.s.

Subjects were also asked to indicate the period of their life that was most satisfying and the period that was most difficult. Subjects were also asked to indicate, in an open ended format as to why those periods were satisfying or difficult.

When a comparison was made between the subjects current age and the ages which they indicated were their most satisfying and most difficult ages, it was found that the span from 21-25 was most frequently mentioned as the most satisfying age (30.8%) and as the most difficult age (24.8%). There appeared to be a tendency for subjects to view the age they just passed as their most satisfying age (39.4%), but no similar patterns appeared in the perceptions of most difficult age Defining adolescence as spanning from 11-20, 15.3% felt adolescence was the most satisfying time of their lives, while 29.5% felt it was the most difficult age.

Table 7

Frequency Counts of Ages Viewed as Most Satisfying and Most Difficult

Most Satisfying Age

Current Age N	15-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	40-46	46+
21-25	3	1	0				
26-30	7	12	0				
31-35	3	10	12				
36-40	0	2	3	7	2		
41-45	0	6	2	3	7	1	2
46-50	2	1	0	1	2	3	2
51+	1	0	2	3	0	3	0
Total	16	32	19	14	11	7	4

Most Difficult Age

Current Age	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46+
21-25	0	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
26-30	0	8	4	6	1	0	0	0	0
31-35	2	3	2	8	10	C	0	0	0
36-40	0	1	1	5	3	4	0	0	0
41-45	0	2	1	3	6	3	5	0	0
46-50	0	1	1	0	1	1	3	2	0
51+	0	1	1	4	0	2	0	1	3
Total	2	19	12	26	21	10	8	3	3

When subjects were asked to indicate why they felt a certain age was the best, they responded with a variety of reasons that clustered in four general areas: personal growth and acceptance (34.3%), freedom (15.7%), family (19.6%), and school/career (17.6%). However, these four groups seemed spread out across the ages so that there were no discernable patterns across age groups.

Table 8

Frequency Count of Subjects Reasons for Viewing a Specific Age as Most Satisfying

Most Satisfying Age	Personal Growth and Acceptance	Freedom	Family	School/Career
15-21	2	5	3	3
21-25	8	1	9	5
26-30	6	4	3	2
31-35	3	3	2	4
36-40	5	2	2	1
40-46	3	1	1	1
46+	1	0	0	2

More of a pattern did appear across age groups in the subjects' responses to why a certain age was the most difficult time. The responses clustered around three areas: family problems (30.5%) with divorce constituting a majority (59.4%) of the family problems; growing up and assuming adult responsibilities (22.9%), and a question of self (18.1%). However, two of the major areas, Assuming Adult Responsibilities and Questioning Self, were clustered in the early years. Family problems was the only major area that cut across all of the most difficult ages.

Table 9

Frequency Count of Subjects Reasons for Viewing a Specific Age as Most Difficult

Most Difficult Age	Family Problems	Assuming Adult Responsibilities	Questioning Self
11-15	1	10	2
16-20	3	12	4
21-25	8	0	2
26-30	8	0	8
31-35	2	0	3
36-40	4	0	0
41-45	3	0	0
46+	3	0	0

The pattern of few differences across the age ranges is a recurring one in the data. There is, however, some evidence to indicate that many women in the sample had made a major change of direction in their lives and were started on the "second lives" mentioned by both Sanguilano and Hagestad. Over a third

of the subjects (33.9%) with an average age of 36.8 were currently in college or graduate schools as defered or re-entry students. Subjects also indicated a trend to reenter the job market. Almost half of the subjects over 35 (47.4%) had reentered the job market after an absence of at least several years. The reentry women were clustered in no particular occupational pattern and represented the same occupations as the women who hadn't left the work force.

Before any conclusions are drawn from the data, it must be remembered that the sample is a biased one. White, highly educated attendees at a conference on age and identity issues of womens lives are not representative of the population of women or even of any large part of it. With this in mind, the data does, however, provide some interesting directions. One is the lack of differences, by age in areas such as definition of most satisfactory and most difficult periods of life, body satisfaction, satisfaction with life at current age, self concept, and agreement with the goals of the women's movement. This lack of differences does not fit the theories of Gould (1972) and Levenson (1978) and needs to be investigated further. It is interesting to note that the results are not inconsistent with Sanguilano (1978) and Hagestads(1979) theory that because individual women's lives are so impacted by the unexpected and by their relationships with men, women's stages of development, etc. cannot be defined by age.

Even the preliminary data collected in this study seems to indicate that somen's developmental patterns are different from men; that except for the phenomena of "re-entry," womens patterns appear to be individualistic and indeed much more work needs to be done in this area before any conclusions can be drawn.

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